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World must make secondary education free for all - report

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Pupils study in a French language class in Mali's capital Bamako on June 15, 2005.
 REUTERS/Finbarr O'Reilly

By Emma Batha

LONDON (AlertNet) – Children around the world must have access to free secondary education - and be legally protected from child labour and child marriage - if they are to be given a proper chance in life, says a major report released Wednesday.

Children's Chances, which the authors say is the first comprehensive comparison of national policies and laws affecting children in all 193 countries, also suggests many countries should be spending more on health.

The report's launch comes as the world prepares to map out the next set of global development goals beyond 2015 - the target date for the current Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

"Progress over the past few decades demonstrates that where there is a will, there is a way to make dramatic changes in children's lives, from survival to basic education," said co-author Dr Jody Heymann, founding director of the World Policy Analysis Centre.

"However, our findings show how far nations still have to go to realise a world where all children have a chance to thrive, not just survive."

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LIVABLE WAGES FOR PARENTS

The study was compiled by an international team who spent seven years poring over policies and laws on areas such as poverty, education, health, discrimination, child labour, child marriage, as well as conditions for working parents.

Speaking at the launch in London, Heymann said a basic need for children is for their family to have enough income to support their development.

Most countries have established a minimum wage, but in 40 countries, the study shows an adult earning the minimum wage with one dependent child would be living on \$2 or less per person per day - below the commonly accepted poverty threshold.

Countries must ensure minimum wages are high enough to lift families out of poverty without reliance on child labour, the report says.

OBSTACLES TO EDUCATION

Heymann said countries have made phenomenal progress in ensuring free primary education for all - one of the targets under the MDGs.

She called for the same attention to be given to secondary education, which has a crucial role to play in lifting young people out of poverty. The report shows 61 countries still charge for some or all secondary schooling.

Child labour and child marriage are other obstacles to education, and many countries do not have adequate laws, it adds.

Some 40 countries allow children to work full-time at 14 or younger, and six of those countries have no minimum age.

Child marriage has a dramatic impact on whether girls finish schools and on their health if they bear children early, but the study shows seven countries do not even set a minimum age for girls to get married.

Heymann pointed out that many countries legalise marrying off girls at a younger age than boys, embedding gender disparity in their laws.

Countries should establish a minimum age for marriage - equal for both sexes and high enough to enable young people to complete secondary education, she added.

LAWS THAT EFFECT CHANGE

Heymann, Dean of the Fielding School of Public Health at University of California, said the report helped show clearly which policies work.

For example, researchers found that when you increased paid maternity leave by 10 weeks, infant mortality rates dropped by 10 percent and child mortality rates by 9 percent. This is because women have more of a chance to breastfeed and get their babies vaccinated.

Heymann singled out Madagascar, which has paid maternity leave and paid leave if a child is sick, and gives working mothers breastfeeding breaks. As a result, it has a particularly low infant mortality rate, even though it is a low-income country.

She said the report also showed that national laws can have a big impact. In Kenya, which has made education compulsory for 12 years and raised the age for full-time employment, secondary school enrolment is double that of neighbouring Uganda and Tanzania.